

# HELP YOURSELF!

Food Rights and Responsibilities: Year 2 findings from  
*Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility*



Food for a traditional wedding, Kaya, Burkina Faso, 2013. Photo: Alassane Pafadnam

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**The second year results of a four-year study on how food price volatility affects everyday life uncovers the grassroots realities of the right to food. Most societies have shared understandings of the rights and responsibilities around protection against hunger. Customary rights and responsibilities, patchy and uneven at the best of times, are affected by rapid changes in food prices and responses to them; becoming less effective buffers against the global drivers of food insecurity. People at risk of hunger are keenly receptive to state and civil society action that strengthens their sense of right to food, but formal responsibilities for action are often unclear and monitoring systems rarely capture local realities. Food security programmes are often demeaning, divisive, unreliable, discriminatory and discretionary. This weakness of public accountability for food security would matter less if people felt that markets were doing the job of guaranteeing access to good food. However, complaints about volatile and rising food prices continue to be a feature of everyday life, contrary to the overall impression of falling prices on world markets.**

# SUMMARY

## Food rights and responsibilities

Each year, the *Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility* research project tracks global, national and local food prices and their effects on everyday life, and selects a special topic for focused research. *Help Yourself! Food Rights and Responsibilities* is the second synthesis report, and this year it zooms in on accountability for local food security. Taking a ground-level perspective on food security policies and programmes, the research asked: do people feel they have a right to food? If so, what does that mean? Who is responsible for ensuring that right is made real? How are they held to account?

The research uncovered some important new insights into the grassroots realities of the right to food. A blend of common custom, local and domestic politics, and international law shapes accountability at the local level. Most societies have shared understandings of the rights and responsibilities around protection against hunger, particularly for the most vulnerable. These ideas often derive from natural rights, moral and religious principles, and membership of society. They imply responsibilities of parents, families, and communities.

### Box 1: Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility

Changes in food prices are significant events in people's lives. With funding from UK Aid and Irish Aid, in 2012 a four-year project began to track the impacts of these changes on everyday life. The social costs of managing change when food prices rise or are volatile are often invisible to policy makers. Nutritional or poverty measures can suggest people have coped well and are 'resilient', but neglect the costs of coping and resilience – more time and effort to feed and look after people; non-monetary effects on family, social, or gender relations; mental health costs such as stress; lower quality of life; feeling forced to eat 'foreign' or 'bad' food. These are important issues to those affected.

*Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility* aims to study how price changes affect the everyday lives of people on low or precarious incomes over the period 2012–2015. It looks at paid work, unpaid care work or family responsibilities, how relationships are affected, and at the resources with which people cope.

The collective of researchers works in 10 urban/peri-urban and 13 rural locations across 10 low- to middle-income countries, revisiting, as far as possible, the same people – approximately 1500. The approach is sociological, aiming to capture the local experiences and effects of global processes, ultimately through a mix of longitudinal qualitative case studies and nationally representative data analysis. In 2013 the study also covered people's experiences of accountability for local food security, adapting established frameworks for the analysis of accountability in public services. Each year we will synthesize our learning and provide more in-depth analysis of topical issues. Visit [www.oxfam.org.uk/foodprices](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/foodprices) for more information.

These customary rights and responsibilities, patchy and uneven at the best of times, are themselves affected by rapid changes in food prices and responses to them; becoming less effective buffers against the global drivers of food insecurity. And despite much capital city talk about the Human Right to Food, and the very real advances in securing such rights in a handful of places, they are not (yet) being replaced – or even reinforced – by formal legal rights with public policies to make them real. Moves towards a more formal, state-administered right to food are in process, and people at risk of hunger are keenly receptive to state and civil society action that strengthens their sense of that right. Yet even where formal rights had been established in law and people knew of them, folk rights remained more accessible and more

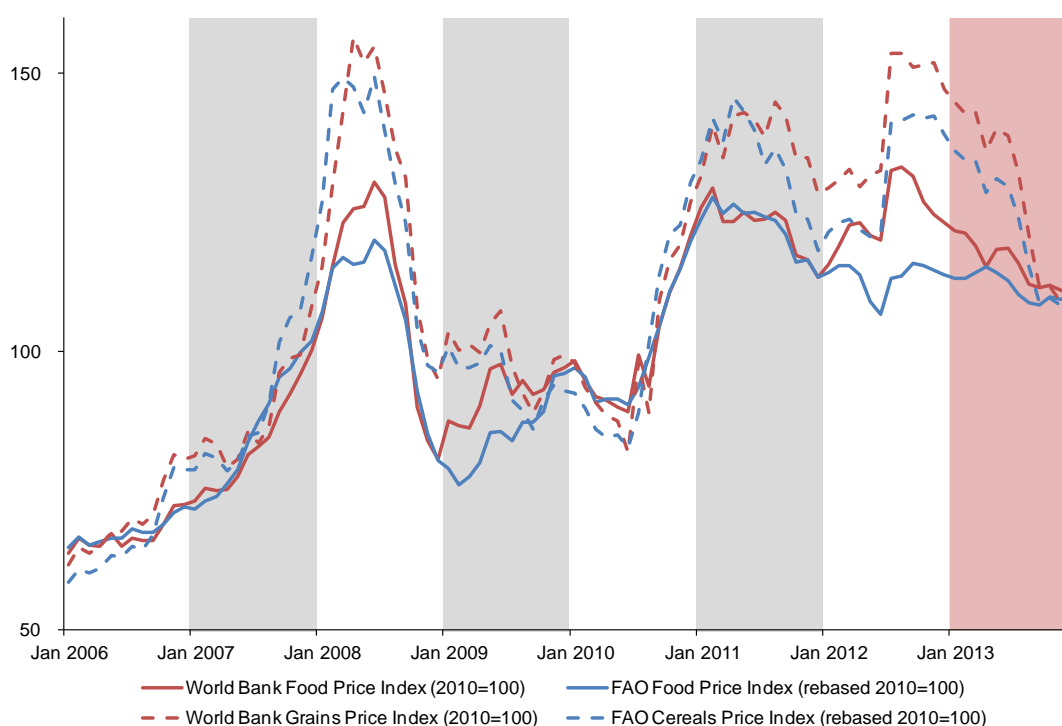
realizable. Few participants in this research felt able to realize those rights, or had the means by which to hold public authorities to account.

There are examples of accountable, responsive action against hunger, and these show what is possible. Once governments explicitly accepted responsibility for ensuring food security, they do more to realize the right to food, and citizens judge their performance against those promises. Much can be done to strengthen accountability. Rights and responsibilities can be clarified and claimed; people can participate in setting more realistic standards and monitoring systems for the policies and programmes they need; and food security failures can be made more visible and more costly for those responsible.

## Global and national food prices

*Help Yourself!* builds on findings from last year in an increasingly vivid picture of how people live in a time of food price volatility, and the implications for human wellbeing and development. Last year's report, *Squeezed*, argued that while food price changes no longer came as a shock, their cumulative adverse effects meant relentless pressures on home life, work life, and social relationships. With the memory of global price spikes so fresh, even the prospect of rising wages (more in some countries and sectors than others) is not enough to ensure people feel properly food secure; gnawing food insecurity and the sense of never getting better off lingers.

**Figure 1: Food price indices decline in 2013, but remain above pre-crisis levels**



Source: Calculated from FAO Food Price Index, <http://www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/foodpricesindex/en/> and World Bank, <http://databank.worldbank.org/>

The weakness of public accountability for food security would matter less if people felt that markets were doing the job of guaranteeing access to good food. However, complaints about volatile and rising food prices continue to be a feature of everyday life according to the research from 2013. This will surprise policy makers; in world markets the overall impression was of falling prices, improving stock levels, and (perhaps premature) optimism that price volatility – that has been so marked since 2006 – was coming to an end. Both the FAO and World Bank composite indices show average global food prices were lower in 2013 than in 2012 or 2011. Generally favourable weather conditions and stock levels, particularly in the main exporting countries, kept staple prices down. Soya bean was the only major food commodity group for

which prices rose. It helped that oil prices, a major driver of higher prices in previous years, did not rise much overall, and fertilizer prices dropped. But even with such favourable conditions, world food prices remained high in real and nominal terms. By the end of 2013 the FAO and World Bank indices were still only 14 and 17 per cent below their all-time highs (see Figure 1).

National market prices partly reflect these shifts towards stable and lower prices compared to recent years. Prices are still high compared to pre-2006 levels, but FAO national figures indicate they moved only slightly in 2013 in most of the countries in this study. However, *local* prices reported in the research communities were often high, increasing and unaffordable. Global, national, and local prices may diverge because:

- international price data focus on staple carbohydrates, but diets include sources of protein, fat, and micronutrient-rich foods;
- official data sources often monitor wholesale rather than retail prices – as recorded in previous years, people believe that retailers can, and do, raise prices regardless of underlying costs;
- idiosyncratic and localized factors such as weather events influence local market prices;
- local markets are integrated into global markets to different degrees, so the level of price transmission from global and national markets to local prices will be uneven (as was discussed in more detail in last year's report, *Squeezed*).

When we look at food and consumer price indices (CPI), we get a picture that contrasts starkly with the global panorama. Both food and general consumer prices have increased in *all* the ten countries since early 2012, particularly in Ethiopia and Pakistan. Only in Bangladesh did food prices rise more slowly than general consumer prices.

## Who is accountable for hunger?

So what can be done to make food security policies and programmes more accountable to those who need them most? The research findings point to weak mechanisms of accountability in relation to the regulation of food markets, food- and cash-transfer schemes, and support to agricultural production, processing and marketing across a range of contexts.

From analyses of other public services such as health and education, we know public services can be accountable when they have i) a clear mandate for action, ii) standards for policies and programmes, iii) systems for monitoring the situation, and iv) sanctions for failures to act. What communities tell us about food security programmes is that responsibilities for action are unclear and monitoring systems rarely capture local realities. Standards are strikingly low judged against those of human rights, targeting efficiency, or protection. Food security programmes are often demeaning, divisive, unreliable, discriminatory and discretionary. There are no sanctions or actions against officials who fail to do their duty. People see no prospects for enforcing responsibilities to ensure food security at the local level. Somewhat forlornly, they instead trust that governments that neglect hungry voters will not be re-elected.

**Governments in food insecure countries** can act by putting accountability at the heart of their food policies. This means first publicly accepting the mandate to realize the right to food, as with Brazil's Zero Fome. People at risk of hunger must be able to clarify what that means through mobilization and real participation in food policy making. But it is not enough for the state to declare the Right to Food, if this does not result in standards and procedures for the delivery of food security policies and programmes. In Kenya, the 2010 constitution declares the Right to Food but already people have been turned away when trying to claim relief food from local chiefs. People at risk of hunger must participate in setting standards for programmes and policies – establishing what the right to food means in practice, in terms of how much of which foodstuff is needed, and how it will be delivered. Rather than only tracking production levels and prices, monitoring systems should be redesigned to follow how well people are eating. This is now being done under the new policy in Indonesia. These systems can develop qualitative and

localized indicators, developing local monitoring capacities to help strengthen the feedback loop.

Monitoring systems will only matter if governments use them to be more responsive. This includes enforcing action against officials who fail in their duty. In countries where a majority of the population is food insecure, there are numerous political economy incentives for the government to act on food security. Research participants in Bangladesh explained that those at risk of hunger (an important proportion of the electorate in developing countries), judge governments on their ability to provide food security.

**Human rights defenders, social movements and progressive NGOs** can do more to stimulate public debate about the right to food. This can include legal action to establish what it means, as in the landmark Indian case. In Kenya, awareness of the right to food increased after the information campaigns around the vote on the new constitution in 2010. In Zambia, NGOs and public radio are successfully stimulating food rights talk. **The mass media** plays a crucial role both in communicating ideas and shedding light on failures in food policy and provision. In Pakistan, the media is seen as the strongest force for holding the government to account for its failure to tackle food price rises. In India the mass media has helped the Right to Food movement there raise the visibility of the problem of hunger, and in so doing has made it costly for national and state governments to sit on their hands. In Indonesia, Oxfam has started building capacity of journalists to report on food and hunger issues. In Bangladesh, the leading daily newspaper regularly covers stories about food security and hunger.

**Donors and NGOs** both need to reflect on their own accountability in relation to food security, including thinking about what kinds of stand-alone initiatives they finance and support. Technical solutions are more prominent in food and nutrition security programming, but these seem to marginalize considerations of accountability. Flag-waving branded food security programmes may intend to strengthen accountability to the citizens and donors of rich countries by showing results and raising visibility. But do they strengthen accountability to those at risk of hunger? Do donor and NGO programmes undermine or support customary institutions of food security? To what extent do the principles of accountability, embedded in humanitarian programmes, shape food security policy and programming design?

Clarifying and claiming rights and responsibilities, wider participation in policymaking spaces, and raising the visibility and costs of failures to protect against hunger can all do a great deal to promote a conducive environment in which people have the resources, power, and space to draw upon community and institutional support to achieve their food security. Without these benign conditions people will continue to be forced to fend for themselves in hostile times of global food insecurity.

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